

4 January 1968

Vietnam Panel  
Summary of Discussions  
1-3 December 1967

The opening session began with a discussion of the current political situation in Vietnam. The author of the relevant background paper presented his views and referred to substantial economic and political progress in South Vietnam, especially the recent village and national elections, which seemed to indicate broad participation and promised an even more democratic response in the future. Intelligence has apparently improved, and the identity and activities of many Viet Cong agents are now known. He also suggested that the United States is learning a great deal about what can be done and that, given time, the fragile flower of South Vietnamese democracy can be nurtured. He stressed the long-term nature of the program, commenting that improvements are only visible on a year-to-year basis, not month by month. This optimism was challenged by some participants who felt that the indices of progress were deceiving and who doubted that foreign-sponsored recommendations could be carried out. One participant remarked that recommendations such as these had been made for many years without success, referring particularly to programs proposed in 1961 to help improve the quality of local leadership.

In discussing the Viet Cong, the group generally agreed that this is the best organized and most powerful political force in South Vietnam and that its strength lies mainly in the villages. One participant suggested that the Viet Cong was

successful only because the opposition to it was so ineffective and that its strength should not be overestimated: the Saigon government must try harder to offer the country an alternative to the Viet Cong. The background paper suggested that political support would have to come through constructing political consensus upward from the villages, with a great deal of village autonomy, rather than down from the central government because the Saigon leadership does not command basic loyalties on the village level. For example, the Viet Cong leaders, although known to the police, have not been arrested because the government lacks power on the local level.

The opposite view was presented by another participant, who said that village attitudes could be changed only by changing the authority structure; to emphasize lower levels was a reaction of desperation because the central government was unwilling to carry out reforms. As for corruption, this could not be eliminated at lower levels without changing the high-level leadership because many jobs throughout the system depend on it. It was suggested that the Vietnamese people view their society as a hierarchy, whose pattern is determined at the top.

Another participant explained that the traditional Confucian social organization is monolithic and that the people consider themselves the will of whatever is "becoming" in their society. Thus no rigid moral questions are involved here. As a result, one factor, such as improving the ARVN, cannot be isolated.

This raised several problems concerning the finding of an alternative to the Viet Cong that was acceptable to the people of South Vietnam. It was generally agreed that certain administrative reforms can and must be made, specifically the abolition of village agricultural taxes which might build support among the population. One participant expressed doubt that such a decision could be carried out on the village level. The counterargument was made that the Vietnamese people place a high value on conforming to established patterns of authority and that the new government, with the Senate, House and cabinet having some power and offering a forum to different views, could establish such a pattern.

In the discussion of corruption it was recognized that district chiefs buy their jobs and recoup their losses by imposing taxes on the village, of which only a minimal amount drift back to Saigon. It was suggested that it would be impossible to wipe out corruption, and perhaps not even necessary, since it was not totally relevant to the situation and since corruption has certain traditional uses in Vietnamese society. Another participant pointed out that corruption was induced by the US-supported policy of deliberately holding down civil service salaries in order to prevent runaway inflation in the country.

One participant remarked that there seemed to be a contradiction in that the government is strongest in the cities, but the focus of its programs is on the rural areas. Rapid urbanization and the great influx of people to the cities have posed many problems which the government apparently has not found means



of handling. It was observed that the Viet Cong had not moved into the cities and apparently has no program to infiltrate the urban proletariat because the government is in control. But even in the cities, the government has failed to establish a "pattern of life," an image, in Vietnamese eyes. Another participant suggested that one element that might be useful in building anti-Communist nationalism was the Confédération Vietnamienne du Travail, which is composed of strong, anti-Communist locals in the rubber plantations, fishing and farming.

Several participants raised the question of whether the situation in Vietnam was unique. One participant offered the view that the problems faced by Saigon were typical of those faced by developing countries, but that the Viet Cong had been able to organize and use these problems to its own advantage. To this participant, American aid to Vietnam was symbolic of US determination to assist underdeveloped countries. Another participant offered a different view, saying that in a recent trip through Southeast Asia, he had changed his mind about the domino theory, as he found little revolutionary potential, e.g. in Burma and even in Northeast Thailand; he suggested that South Vietnam may be the only place in Southeast Asia where communism still has a chance to triumph. In this connection there was general agreement that the Viet Cong, as a well-trained and well-organized insurgent group, was unique in Southeast Asia.

Also unique was the general historical situation, which gave obvious advantage to the Viet Cong, because of its identification with the independence movement.

A corresponding disadvantage of the government is that many of its members had fought on the side of the French. In this connection one participant noted that the United States appears to many Vietnamese as a successor to the French. A review of the last 100 years of Vietnamese history reveals many unique features--the structures introduced by the French, the diffuse nature of South Vietnamese society as opposed to the more organized North Vietnamese society and politics, and the phenomenon of modern nationalism, a new concept in South Vietnam, which is complicated by the overlay of ideology and war. It was suggested that this area must now be rationalized socially and politically, an extremely difficult task, especially for an alien military establishment. This task is made more difficult by the fact, as noted by one participant, that the villages are disintegrating and that no viable government can be achieved in South Vietnam in terms either of the extended family concept or of traditional kinship patterns that have evolved over the years. It was suggested that this situation might one day make necessary a confederation of the two parts of Vietnam.

In discussing the nature and prospects of the Saigon government, it was recognized that most of the major criticisms were valid, and also that it is extremely difficult to produce the kind of reform we want under present circumstances. A note of caution was sounded that attempts at the speedy reorganization of the South Vietnamese authority structure might lead to a new totalitarianism, which the US would not want. The question was also raised--but not answered--

whether the sole choice existing for the South Vietnamese people is between the writ of Saigon and that of Hanoi.

### The Military Situation

The discussion was opened by the author of the relevant background paper who spoke chiefly about the bombing of North Vietnam. His conclusion was that bombing had neither prevented nor reduced infiltration of men and supplies, although bombing pauses have permitted supply movements during the day rather than at night. Bombing has helped, not hurt, North Vietnamese morale; and it is ineffective because the human and material costs are enormous and are increasing faster for the US than for Hanoi. Another participant stressed the costs to the US in terms of international public opinion, observing that any country that has been bombed is naturally in sympathy with North Vietnam.

There was general agreement on most of these points, but one participant complained that the military arguments for bombing had not so far been presented fairly at the meeting. Several participants, acknowledging that they did not accept those arguments, attempted to summarize the military viewpoint as follows: (1) if you have the capability, you should use it; (2) a cessation of bombing would give the enemy an opportunity for a day-time buildup; (3) bombing is necessary to the morale of US and Vietnamese infantry personnel; (4) if the pressure on North Vietnam through bombing is gradually increased, it might eventually break the will of the North Vietnamese; (5) bombing ties up North Vietnamese resources; (6) it sets a limit to what North Vietnam can do to us and



(7) unlimited bombing would be preferable but this option has not been offered, forcing the military to argue for a limited posture in order not to lose everything (this argument appeals to many people, e.g. the Senate Armed Services Committee). Another participant added: (8) bombing costs money but saves lives; (9) since we are about to win, stopping the bombing would snatch victory from us and (10) bombing the North is part of a two-pronged attack-- you can't win in the South if you stop hurting them in the North.

Another participant added that we should not stop bombing entirely because it would be politically difficult to start again and that this would weaken our negotiating position. Another participant suggested the military argument might be summarized as follows: we have certain weapons and the question is whether or not they can be used effectively; he made an analogy with the atomic bomb in 1945.

One participant raised the question of why the military seem emotionally committed to bombing and suggested that the real problem was that a cessation of the bombing would be tantamount to admitting failure and that this might have serious consequences for the military establishment, including possibly a complete change in the structure of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council.

A discussion ensued on the relation of political and military objectives. A participant with a military background urged that it was the responsibility of the policy makers to state objectives clearly to the military; the military

then advises what it can do to help achieve them. He raised two questions: are the objectives clearly stated? and are they clearly within the vital interests of the United States?

On other aspects of the military situation, the author of the paper said that although the situation in the South had improved, the Viet Cong had not been beaten and the irregular forces were still strong, especially in the Delta. The claim was made that the Viet Cong will not negotiate because they think they are winning. The ARVN was still bad, and one participant raised the question of how much control we had over ARVN, comparing it to the situation in Korea where the Supreme Commander demanded and got improvement in the ROK troops. The author of the paper also suggested that the pacification program had improved, but that all the progress had been made by the Americans and not the ARVN.

On the subject of the ground war, a major question was raised concerning the efficacy of "search-and-destroy" versus "clear-and-hold" operations. The author of the background paper suggested that the confusion in objectives was reflected in the difference in the way General Weyand and his superior, General Westmoreland, interpret their directives from Washington. He further contended that if the present policy of giving equal emphasis to "search and destroy" and pacification is continued, an indefinite number of American troops will be needed, and that even if the emphasis is shifted to "clear-and-hold" operations, perhaps a million American troops may be needed.



There was general agreement that strategic bombing--of the Hanoi-Haiphong area--was counter-productive and should be separated from tactical bombing which might be necessary to support ground operations of our own troops, near the DMZ, for example. There was also a feeling with one or two dissents, that a cessation of strategic bombing should not be coupled with insistence on negotiations. It was also suggested that if strategic bombing were halted without conditions, pressures on Hanoi to end the war, especially from the European Communist world, would increase. One participant noted that bombing was part of a strategy of gradually increased pressure, based on the assumption that at some point Hanoi's will would break. The whole theory of increased pressure, not only the bombing, had failed, however, because such a collapse of will, if it did happen, would occur only when the military action was at a higher level than the American people would be willing to support.

#### Objectives

The objectives described in the background paper were seen in three dimensions: geographical (to what extent is this a war within South Vietnam?); ideological (to what extent is Hanoi like-minded with Peking and Moscow?); and temporal (how long do we have to stay?). There was general agreement that US objectives have been plural, that objectives may vary among members of the US government, that they have not always been clearly defined, and that there are different levels of objectives, unstated as well as stated.

One participant attempted to place the US involvement in Vietnam in historical perspective. Our original involvement and our escalation came, he said, in the context of historical "traumas" -- the Chinese Communist takeover of the mainland, the Korean War, and the Chinese intervention in that war. The situation was complicated by our incorrect analysis and perception of Chinese objectives, of the uniqueness of the Vietnamese situation and of the effect of nationalism on communism, and by our over-estimation of Chinese capability during the 1950's. The confusion about objectives has increased because of "rhetorical escalation," wherein considerations of national honor are now involved as well as an assumption that Vietnam is a vital US concern.

Several participants raised questions about the extent to which our commitment itself had become a reason for further involvement. The view was expressed that our original objective of demonstrating that wars of national liberation would not succeed had some validity and that it had now been largely achieved, although at great cost. Our present objective seems to be to get out of the war without losing what we have achieved. Another participant saw two ranges of objectives: the broader one of limiting Chinese Communist expansion, including wars of national liberation, and a narrower one inside Vietnam, of producing a situation in which our friends could play the primary political role, even though not an exclusive one, and at the same time assuring other Southeast Asian countries that this was not a surrender that would threaten them; he quoted Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as saying that the United States could and

should have gotten out of Vietnam at several points in the past, but that this was impossible now because of the heavy US commitment. The problem, another participant ventured, is how to avoid such inevitably increasing commitments in the future.

Other participants questioned the effect of the US presence in Vietnam as a deterrent to communism elsewhere in Southeast Asia; one person doubted the claim that US presence in Southeast Asia had prevented a Communist takeover in Indonesia. It was suggested that other Southeast Asians view the situation primarily in terms of their own country's national interest and accept the American presence because they want US assistance for their own development. They would like a US withdrawal but in the right way and over a long period of time.

The necessity of maintaining a line between communism and non-communism was stressed by one individual. Although Vietnam is unique in some respects, the Viet Cong and Hanoi believe in the domino theory. And although there is no danger of South Vietnam going Communist now (because there is no likelihood of US withdrawal), Vietnam is representative of the US commitment to underdeveloped countries.

A number of participants took issue with this view, feeling that the question of a Communist role in South Vietnam not only had to be discussed but probably had to be accepted. This was a question of priorities--how important is it to us that South Vietnam does not become Communist? Can we admit to making a mistake?



It was suggested that containing Chinese expansion is irrelevant at present as China is not expanding; North Vietnam, however, is expanding and this is a legitimate concern.

The argument that the fulfillment of commitments could be an objective was attacked on the grounds that one could never tell in advance how far one would go or what price one would have to pay. It was suggested that we are a pragmatic people and must not be locked into rigid, doctrinaire positions. In this connection a participant offered two broad and more important objectives related to Vietnam: (1) to avoid a general war with the Soviet Union, which is more important than what happens in Vietnam and (2) to restore US domestic health and unity, which requires a maximum effort to get out of Vietnam. This view was supported by another participant who commented that both of these objectives are vital for "system maintenance" (i.e. the maintenance of US society). He said that enough force could eliminate communism from South Vietnam, but that this would not be compatible with the maintenance of our own social system; for this reason we will have to accept a Communist role in South Vietnam.

The confusion of objectives and policy was deplored by one participant who asserted that, in many cases, policies have been put in the category of objectives, which makes compromise difficult or impossible.

Two participants doubted that it was possible to get a single statement of objectives, because expressing objectives is a part of tactics and strategy, e.g., the greater and lesser emphasis on communism at different times. It was

suggested that one purpose of stating objectives was to reassure ourselves and others. Objectives vary according to what looks possible and are really only justifications for what seems necessary for other reasons. For example, North Vietnamese infiltration, although known about for a long time, was only mentioned in 1961, when it appeared necessary to commit US troops to avoid military defeat of the South Vietnamese government. The real objective in 1954 was nothing less than the denial of South Vietnam to communism. The problem now is to adopt objectives that will lessen the likelihood of steps leading to an invasion of North Vietnam.

In this connection there was a general feeling that recent events, particularly Secretary McNamara's resignation and the television interview with Generals Eisenhower and Bradley, were ominous. On the other hand, there was a suggestion that the Eugene McCarthy challenge and the Senate resolution calling for UN action might indicate the growth of moderating pressures on the administration.

This led to a discussion of the relationship of ends to means, of the importance of Vietnam in the general scheme of things, and of whether national interest, if ever defined, can be served by an effort that requires a disproportionate allocation of resources for foreign policy objectives.

The suggestion was made that the US should place its relations with Asian nations on the basis of conditional commitments, that these mutual commitments should be spelled out wherever possible, and that the Asians will understand and respect this.

### Policy Alternatives

The next session began with a recapitulation of a number of ideas that had been presented in previous sessions. Goals such as no wider war, domestic tranquility and preserving a general balance of power were reiterated. One participant called for the increased use of multilateral instruments, more emphasis on mutual commitments in the relationship between Washington and Saigon, and more attention to our future relationships with all of Vietnam. In this connection it was stated that North Vietnam might even find itself someday sharing an interest with the US. The uniqueness of the Vietnamese situation was again underlined. It was suggested that considerations to be kept in mind included limiting North Vietnamese expansion in Southeast Asia and searching for a settlement which would not imply our abandonment of the South Vietnamese but would create a politically tolerable situation. It was added that it might be necessary to sacrifice some of our narrow objectives in South Vietnam for broader ones. Several scenarios were tabled, among them a discussion of the dangers and disadvantages of the present course. There was strong encouragement for the political diversification of the South Vietnamese government and for an offer to the Viet Cong in unambiguous terms concerning their role in the political life of Vietnam, this to be made explicit, by privately and publicly putting forward proposals for negotiations. On the subject of bombing there was agreement that this had been an essential element of our discussion and that the discussion considered two points of view: the stopping of all bombing



of the North; bombing only north of a certain line or to achieve tactical objectives. This presumably might involve bombing Laos and those positions in the North that constitute a danger for our forces in the South. It was generally agreed that the pacification effort must be pursued, that the emphasis must be changed from "search and destroy" to "clear and hold" and that the role of the ARVN must be expanded. Various ideas were presented regarding new elections, international supervision, a new government, an international presence, a guarantee by a group of neighboring countries, and economic development. No one advocated early withdrawal.

The remainder of the discussion focused on the following subjects: policy of de-escalation, negotiations, face-saving problems and prospects for the future. An impassioned plea was made for de-escalation based on evidence that one of the panelists felt was overwhelmingly indicative of the intention of the administration to invade the North. His fear was strengthened by the resignation of Secretary McNamara, who had taken the moderate position in the cabinet on bombing and on the ABM system. It was also suggested that some elements in the Pentagon might even welcome Chinese entry into the war.

The question was raised as to how one could scale down. A decision of this nature would imply a different military strategy. There was no demonstrated proof that a reduction of military effort would in effect reduce casualties.

A discussion ensued on the feasibility of creating an alternative system of preventing infiltration such as an electronic barrier. It was underlined that such

a barrier might work but that the system would be no panacea. The military probably would be reluctant to employ it as a substitute for bombing. The point was then raised whether Hanoi was responsible for US escalation. It was suggested that US policy should not be dependent on Hanoi's postures, that de-escalation must be unilateral and that it must not be made a condition of negotiations. Guidelines must be suggested to our policy makers. We are not trying to kill all the North Vietnamese, so we must not maximize death. There was no parallel situation in South Korea. We must redefine our task.

In connection with de-escalation, one participant suggested that any modification of present strategy must be synchronized with a plan for reducing the bombing or stopping the bombing completely. Another emphasized, however, that whatever policy and programs we choose in the South should relate to the South and not to the North. It was also suggested that if our objective is to defeat and drive out the Viet Cong, this is meaningless unless the political situation is improved. It was also suggested that this objective is too broad.

One participant insisted that it was feasible tactically and technically to de-escalate. Another participant claimed that in terms of de-escalation, there was no alternative to the current approach that has any assurance of being adopted. What we want in effect is something more for something less. De-escalation would imply a shifting or lessening of objectives. There was a general feeling that while the Administration might concede the costs already paid, it did not share the group's concern that the present situation constituted a crisis.

It was also agreed that any discussion of de-escalation should not include a reference to enclaves. The general feeling was that de-escalation must take place without being tied to negotiations, and with no reference to peace proposals or withdrawal of US troops. The emphasis was on "cooling down" the situation.

One participant raised the question of whether the group could in effect prevent escalation and urged that it would be futile to get into the subject of negotiations. He further suggested that any group action be taken in two sections: the first a statement to register the opinion of the group regarding the steps we all fear; and second, a continuing activity to clarify our thinking about the objectives. Another member of the panel urged a better definition of de-escalation and raised the issue of tactics, on which no consensus could be reached, such as whether all bombing should be stopped or only strategic bombing.

The general consensus was that we must "cool things down" in the South so that we can live with the reality.

On the subject of negotiations there was a general feeling that this was mentioned too often with no results. One participant suggested that Asians do not negotiate and that in any case negotiations should not be regarded as the only means of resolving the conflict. Several other types of situations may evolve. For example, there might be a truce during which the Viet Cong could be brought to realize that they cannot win total victory. Several participants



were convinced that although the bombing should not be tied to negotiations, pressure would be put on Hanoi, particularly by several East European governments, should the bombing stop. It was underlined, however, that no concessions could be expected and that there are no signs from Hanoi or the NLF regarding a settlement. On the other hand, negotiations appear to the public to be the only means of ending the conflict.

On the subject of face-saving, it was suggested that any de-escalation must take into account the necessity not only to protect US and South Vietnamese morale but to explain the earlier US position. Too much emphasis has been placed on fear and not enough on the anticipation of certain gains.

Another member of the panel insisted that the United States accept the fact that it has failed and that it has miscalculated. At the present time President Johnson seems to believe that ultimate victory will compensate for the high costs. It was suggested that a bad settlement would be bad for the United States, but it would be worse if we achieved the same settlement three years later or if a settlement in Secretary Rusk's terms were obtained in five years' time or by an invasion of the North.

It was further suggested that the war must be de-Americanized and localized and that some effort must be made to help the President and the Secretary of State reach this decision.

There was some feeling that what happens in the next year is very important. There are obvious obstacles to changing the present course. In this connection

it was pointed out that the President and his advisers now say in private what they say in public--that the risks of alternate strategies are serious--and it was suggested that the only way to persuade the President is to convince him that the risks of the present policy are greater than those of other alternatives.

One participant contributed the following statement:

- a. A forcible takeover of South Vietnam by communism is now unlikely;
- b. The US cannot destroy communism in South Vietnam without destroying North Vietnam;
- c. The US cannot completely deny South Vietnam to communism without invading North Vietnam.

Even then communism cannot necessarily be defeated militarily. To attempt this would run counter to the over-riding US interests of avoiding excessive risk of a general war and restoring domestic tranquility, the latter in part by limiting rather than expanding foreign commitments.

Another participant offered the following: we can hold back the spread of communism by force in Southeast Asia. This is important, although South Vietnam is somewhat a special case. However, the costs and dangers of our doing so are unreasonable. We must reduce our aims to match costs and dangers we can't afford, i.e. to a military holding action with lower casualties on both sides. Finally, if we do this we can hold out until the right time for a general settlement.

### The United Nations

Reference was made to the two background papers on the United Nations and the problem of counterinsurgency and the UN and the Vietnam War.

Regarding the possibility of UN intervention, it was generally agreed that the United Nations can play no operationally useful role at the present time and under the present circumstances. One participant addressed himself to the phenomenon of the mythology of the commitment and suggested that it is generally believed we are committed to what we are doing by the UN Charter and the SEATO Treaty. This is misleading, he argued, since the UN Charter and the SEATO Treaty impose no commitments to intervene. Chapter VII of the UN Charter suggests a right to do so but not Chapters I and II (which have been cited by Secretary Rusk on the nature of intervention). Under SEATO we have no commitment to intervene with force, although we do have the right as appropriate.

On the other hand, the catalytic role of the United Nations should not be underestimated nor should it be abused. The lessons of Korea are important. We cannot expect too much from any consideration of the war by the UN. If a cease-fire group were set up in the General Assembly, the tendency would obviously be to press the US for some political settlement. If, however, the bombardment of North Vietnam ceases without any quid pro quo, the UN can be made useful as an adjunct to quiet diplomacy. The US could inscribe the Vietnamese War on the agenda of the General Assembly after the bombing



was stopped. All we can expect the UN to do in line with the January 1966 resolution is to call for a cease-fire and the convening of a peace conference without prior conditions. This would disarm the French, U Thant and the Russians. It was suggested, however, that this could not be done if the issue were presented in the Security Council since in the Security Council the Soviet Union would be too exposed. The UN must play a role, however, to help us out of our present emphasis on unilateral action and to help us share the responsibility. At issue is not only the present conflict in Vietnam but the role of the United Nations in similar situations which may arise in the future.

Another participant raised the problem of UN membership, which is a crucial consideration. We cannot count on the UN without confronting this issue, yet we will need the UN to disengage us from Vietnam. This of course means recognition of the problem of seating Communist China. It is unreasonable to think of South and even North Vietnamese representation in the United Nations without reference to China's representation. It was suggested that the Mansfield resolution to put the issue of Vietnam before the Security Council was an effort to "cool down" the situation, but that it would produce nothing.

It was also suggested that any reference to any post-hostilities settlement in the resolution might include a provision for UN involvement. Mention was also made of certain options in the area of international solutions, such as references to the General Assembly, to a controlled cease-fire, and to another armistice consortium different from the ICC.

In its final session the group considered a draft memorandum prepared by a small committee and asked the Endowment officers and staff to circulate to the members a revised version based on the suggestions and comments of the group. It was agreed that the memorandum should be presented to the White House and the State Department. The Chairman cautioned the members to keep in mind the confidential nature of the discussions and the memorandum. Neither the substance of the discussions nor the memorandum were to be made public at least until the panel's views had been presented to appropriate government officials.